



Region 2  
3201 Spurgin Road  
Missoula, MT 59804

July 25, 2016

Dear Interested Citizen:

Thank you for your consideration and/or comments on a proposal by Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) to conduct forested habitat restoration treatments on 372 acres of the Blackfoot Clearwater Wildlife Management (BCWMA), in Missoula County northeast of Clearwater Junction. Forest restoration would focus on returning forest conditions to within the historic range of variability by mimicking natural disturbance typical of the forest type and disturbance regime. The treatments would enhance aspen habitats, open up canopy for improved forage production, and improve forest resiliency by reducing fire risk and beetle infestation risk. Treatments would include salvage logging of mountain pine beetle infected trees, commercial thinning, fuels reduction (thinning, piling, and burning), prescribed burning, and removal of encroaching conifers within aspen clones. This project would begin to implement a long-term forest restoration strategy aimed at improving forest conditions in a landscape context for the benefit of all endemic wildlife species on the BCWMA.

Enclosed is a decision document in which FWP explains its rationale for choosing the Proposed Action alternative, with modifications outlined in the Decision Notice. Upon completion of the public involvement process and by inclusion of this Decision Notice, FWP accepts the draft environmental assessment (EA) as final.

FWP will request approval of this forest restoration project from the Fish & Wildlife Commission at its scheduled meeting on August 11, 2016, in Helena. This meeting is open to the public, as are other regularly scheduled Commission meetings.

Please feel free to contact me at 406-542-5500 with any questions you may have. Thank you for your interest and participation.

Sincerely,

Randy Arnold  
Regional Supervisor

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**Decision Notice for**  
**Draft Environmental Assessment,**  
**BCWMA Forest Restoration Project**

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks  
Region 2  
3201 Spurgin Road, Missoula MT 59804  
406-542-5500

July 2016

**DESCRIPTION OF PROPOSED ACTION**

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) proposed to conduct forested habitat restoration treatments on 372 acres of the Blackfoot Clearwater Wildlife Management (BCWMA), in Powell County northeast of Clearwater Junction. FWP proposes to mechanically thin the shade-tolerant understory species (primarily Douglas-fir) from below while favoring retention of dominant and co-dominant larch, ponderosa pine, and older age-class Douglas-fir. In ponderosa pine stands second growth and beetle-killed pine would be removed from the understory while favoring dominant and co-dominant ponderosa pine. Patches of younger trees and snags would be retained within thinning units to provide cover for wildlife and to more closely mimic vegetative mosaics typical of stands maintained by high-frequency, low-intensity fire regimes. In some stands, slash would be left on site but pulled away from the boles of retained trees to allow for the possibility of prescribed fire in the future. Stand 10 has been identified for a prescribed burn following forestry treatment. Stand 10 lies adjacent to the state university system-owned Bandy Ranch where similar forest management treatments would be applied. The University of Montana would hire a contractor to apply post-treatment burning on the Bandy Ranch and across Stand 10 of the BCWMA in order to improve understory conditions. In other stands, slash would be piled and burned on site when conditions permit.

These treatments would begin to implement a long-term forest restoration strategy aimed at improving forest conditions in a landscape context for the benefit of all endemic wildlife species. FWP anticipates this project would generate enough funds to pay for the forest treatments proposed on this project and may generate funds to be deposited into the Forest Management Account (§ 87-1-621, MCA).

**ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED TO THE PROPOSED ACTION**

**No Action:**

The no action alternative would allow for a continued departure from historic conditions that would further degrade wildlife habitat conditions associated with this project's area. No action would allow the stands proposed for treatment to continue to grow trees on sites that do not favor dense forest conditions,

resulting in increased susceptibility to forest insect and diseases and risk of stand-replacement fire not typical of forests in these areas.

## **MONTANA ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY ACT PROCESS**

FWP is required to assess impacts to the human and physical environment under the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA). The Blackfoot-Clearwater WMA Forest Restoration Project proposal and its effects were documented by FWP in a Draft Environmental Assessment (EA).

## **PUBLIC REVIEW PROCESS**

FWP is required by MEPA to assess potential impacts of its proposed actions to the human and physical environments, evaluate those impacts through an interdisciplinary approach, including public input, and make a decision based on this information. FWP released a Draft EA for public review of BCWMA Forest Restoration Project proposal on May 21 and accepted public comment until June 20, 2016 (for a 31-day comment period).

Legal notice of the proposal and availability of the Draft EA was published once each in the *Independent Record* (Helena, May 20), *Missoulian* (May 20), and *Seeley Swan Pathfinder* (May 26) newspapers.

FWP mailed 14 copies of the Draft EA, and emailed approximately 38 notifications of the EA's availability, to adjacent landowners, interested individuals, groups and agencies. The EA was available for public review and comment on FWP's web site (<http://fwp.mt.gov/>, "Recent Public Notices" and "Submit Public Comments") from May 23 through June 20, 2016. (Near the start of this period, FWP's website experienced problems and some web content was lost; hence, this Draft EA was reposted on FWP's website on May 25.)

## **SUMMARY OF PUBLIC COMMENT**

FWP received no public comment during the 30-day public comment period. However, during the public comment period internal comments were heard from regional and state wildlife division staff.

Summarized comments include:

- *Retaining understory patches of regenerating Douglas-fir to maintain a mix of forest cover within the understory.*
- *Increasing snag retention in stands that have been affected by mountain pine beetle.*
- *Excluding approximately 10 acres within Stand 1 to create a buffer around an established great grey owl nest and only entering that stand during winter (December – January), prior to the active great grey owl breeding period.*
- *Desired future conditions related to using forest management as a tool to mimic disturbance (historically, fire) in order to enhance habitat for small mammals (e.g., rodents), retain and recruit large-diameter snags for cavity-nesting species, and enhance a mosaic understory that favors recruitment of shrubs and grasses that benefit big game.*

## **FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT**

FWP has reviewed the EA and applicable laws, regulations, and policies and has determined that this action will not have significant effect on the human environment. Therefore, I conclude that the EA is the appropriate level of analysis and the preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement is not necessary.

## **DECISION**

Based upon the Draft Environmental Assessment (EA) and the applicable laws, regulations, and policies, we have determined that the proposed action will not have measureable negative effects on the human and physical environments associated with this project. Therefore, I conclude that the EA is the appropriate level of analysis and the preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement is unnecessary.

This forest management project now includes minor modifications (discussed in this Decision Notice) in the prescriptions based on the recommendations of Region 2 wildlife staff.

The proposal is consistent with statute that requires FWP to implement programs that address fire mitigation, pine beetle infestation, and wildlife habitat enhancement on forested lands it owns. This project meets all those objectives.

## **CONCLUSION**

By notification of this Decision Notice, the draft EA and the modifications discussed in this Decision Notice are hereby made the final EA. The finding of selection for the Proposed Action alternative is the product of this Decision Notice. I am pleased to recommend to the Fish & Wildlife Commission that it approve this project.



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Randy Arnold  
Region 2 Supervisor  
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

7/25/16

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Date